

# The Development of the Workspace as a Social System



Research Plan  
Student number: 4707044  
Interiors Buildings Cities  
MSc 3/4 Graduation Studio  
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*“The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.”*

**– Gloria Steinem, feminist.**

**(Thoughts on Life, Love and Rebellion)**

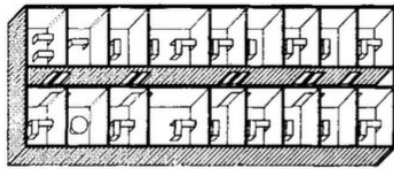
## **Introduction**

This Research Plan focusses on social structures and gender paradigms within the workspace and in society. The motivation for this topic originates from the Graduation Studio of Interiors Buildings Cities, which examines historical, contemporary and future offices and from the interest in learning more about the effect of societal values on the contemporary office, to be able to find a way to change the continuous power relations inside the workspace. Throughout the years, the office has become an important aspect of everyday human life. It reflects a part of society that is connected to social engagement and societal norms and values. The question is: how can we design a workspace that challenges its current societal structures and gender paradigms? It is a complex issue in the architectural field, because gender inequality is not something that is solely physical. It is about personal beliefs, behaviour and intellection. Because the workspace is inseparable from society, societal beliefs should change before the contemporary office can change. Francis Duffy writes about the influence of shifting social ideas on the spatial arrangements of offices in the previous century in his text *Office Buildings and Organisational Change* (1980).

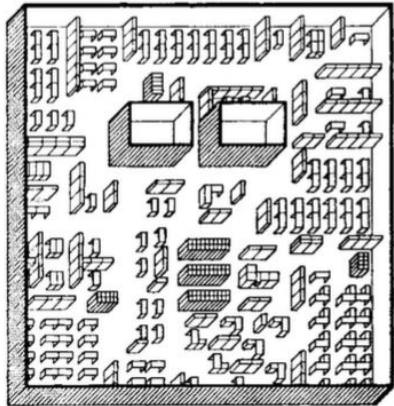
At the same time, this Research Plan elaborates on the societal and environmental consequences of contemporary corporate systems. During the Covid-pandemic in 2020, the future use of the office has become debatable. With the pandemic and its consequence of working from home, the office and domestic life grew into one. This means that there was no physical distinction between work life and private life. Taken from Amy's lecture *The Changing Workplace*, the work efficiency of women decreased more than that of men while working from home in 2020. The underlying reason for this phenomenon is the bigger feeling of responsibility of caring and providing for other people that women generally have. This caring commitment also applies to environmental change. “Business as usual equals death”, as was the motto for environmentalists during the a climate strike of 25 April 2019 in London. The future office should reflect our changing society, in which the gender discourse and climate change are taking the upper hand.

The Research Plan starts with the spatial change in office lay-outs in the previous century in three stages and continues with the question of the societal impact on the workspace in contemporary times, in which issues such as the pandemic and climate change have big impact on society. The reflective problematization will describe the research questions and its relevance within society and in the Graduation Studio and the methodology delineates the research strategies.

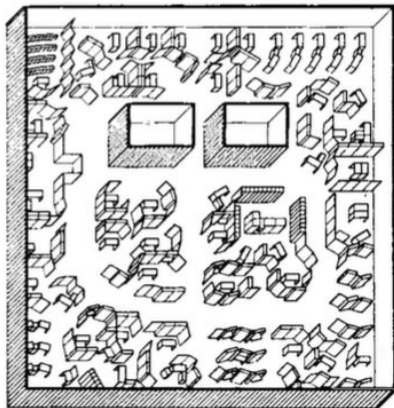
Front page image: Agnes Denes, “Wheatfield - A Confrontation,” Accessed October 31, 2021 from <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>.



*Cellular*



*Open plan*



*Landscaped*



Image 1: “Cellular, open and landscaped floor plan,” from *The Changing Workplace* lecture by Amy Thomas, 16 September, 2021.

Image 2: “Larkin Company Administration building, Buffalo, New York, 1904,” from “Office Buildings and Organisational Change,” Francis Duffy, p. 267.

## Academic positioning

The first texts of the Research Seminar deal with the gender topic and changes in office lay-out in the previous century. Daphne Spain's text *The Contemporary Workplace* mentions the notion of spatial separation by gender due to occupational segregation "since managers are overwhelmingly male and clerical staff are predominantly female." (Spain, p. 118). However, I believe that the matter of gender segregation is more complex than Spain's explanation and that underlying social ideas and beliefs influence this segregation as well. Women are active in more professional fields than just clerical work. Francis Duffy also questions if shifting social ideas influence the spatial arrangements of offices. In his text *Office Buildings and Organisational Change*, he researches the impact of democracy and society upon spatial structures. To examine the change in office lay-out, Duffy describes the development of the office floor plan in three stages; the cellular floor plan, the open floor plan and the landscaped floor plan.

### Cellular floor plan

This type of floor plan is a traditional form of spatial arrangement. The plan includes lots of walls and partitions and creates a cell-like structure. In the workspace this means that staff have their own office or share one with a few others. Even the secretaries had their own chambers. An additional benefit of this arrangement is the increase in privacy in the workspace. One consequence of separate office units that Spain mentions in her text is the possible (dis)respect for the person occupying the office. She states that women who work in an enclosed office space, in general, receive less privacy than men. "Even walls and a door do not insure privacy for the typical working woman in the same way they do for the typical working man." (Spain, p. 124). The immediate question that rises is the underlying reason for this phenomenon. It links back to the matter of spatial separation due to gender segregation. Because of the high number of female secretaries, the chances are that people assume that a woman could impossibly be an executive or a manager, so they treat her in a different manner. This has to do with societal standards: women work as secretaries, men work as managers. This phenomenon is also mentioned in Kim Dovey's text *Corporate Towers and Symbolic Capital*

about architectural representation to increase the value of symbolic capital. The typical building advertisement includes social hierarchies and show the masculine domains in which conservative ideas prevail. "The executive office shows a male executive conferring with other men over an old-style wooden desk. (...) The reception area (...) is served exclusively by attractive young women." (p. 183). The secretarial position turned into a culturally feminized function.

### Open floor (vs closed door)

Cellular floor spans of historical buildings were limited by old construction technologies. The implementation of steel and concrete, however, ensured longer spans that eliminated the need for a large number of internal walls. As the term *open floor* implies, this development resulted in an open arrangement with lack of internal partitions. In office buildings with an open floor plan, employees work in open areas with less privacy, but better communication opportunities. This enhances work efficiency, but creates bigger (gender) inequalities. These open floor areas were also known as *the secretarial pools*. The public nature of these spaces led to a lack of privacy and into potential surveillance to stop the transfer of important knowledge, because secretaries are bound by the rules of confidentiality. "The spatial distribution of employees in an office highlights the complex ways in which spatial segregation contributes to gender stratification." (Spain, p. 123). Another way of looking at this problem would be that people are allocated a workplace based on their position within the company rather than their gender. The motives for these spatial arrangements could be the different tasks that exist within the office.

### Landscaped floor plan

An attempt to remove all spatial status distinctions resulted in the landscaped floor plan in which partitions and walls are exchanged for an organic freedom in lay-out. The *office landscape* [burolandschaft] was meant as a status-free form of organisation with desks randomly placed inside the space and an increase in communication efficiency.

Having said this, the social relationships inside the office were often still visible. Regularly, there was a special area for the manager which was divided by plants and screens and had additional space to still symbolize status and increase their sense of privacy. "... to the extent that there are fewer plants to provide privacy for secretaries, spatial segregation reinforces women's lower status." (Spain, p. 125).

Although many offices had adopted this new spatial lay-out, it had lost its popularity by the end of the 70s. This supposedly status-free feature did not materialize enough. "Those who had power in conventional offices still had it." (Spain, p. 124) New building construction materials had created bigger floor spans and air-conditioning had made spatial partitions redundant, but the demand for spatial control amongst employees led to new arrangements. Other reasons for the decrease in popularity were the physical conditions of not having privacy or close access to windows. So if landscaped office floor plans would not be the future, what would?

#### The future of the female perspective

Although women were able to enter the labour market at the beginning of the 20th century, they still experienced structural barriers. This historical deprivation is still feasible in the workspace today. In the world of finance, for example, women are interrupted and questioned more critically than their male colleagues, as is written in the article by Baazil, Thomas and Tielbeke called *De Homo Economicus Is Een Vrouw* [The Homo Economicus Is A Woman]. On the other hand, times of crises, such as the current covid pandemic, ask for new paradigms in which women are often able to step in. According to Baazil et al. (2021), it is noticeable that the rise of female executives coincides with a turbulent period in the global economy: "It is women in particular who are driving the intellectual revolution to make the economy more humane, more sustainable and less abstract". As Yanis Varoufakis mentions in the podcast 'Uncommon Sense: A Vision For A Post-Capitalist Society': "Someone should always keep pointing out the failures of the system". A similar notion is discussed in the conversation between Janet Yellen and Kristalina Georgieva about gender prejudices in the workplace, an IMF podcast. "There is a cultural problem in the economic profession and we [as women] need to change the culture to make a more positive environment, to promote diversity

and inclusion." These changing female positions are a positive sign, but society apparently needs a time of crisis before paradigms can change. Is there a different way to challenge current societal structures?

#### The hybrid office

Evidently the covid-pandemic brought few positive notes; most women were at a disadvantage during this time. With the inevitable result of working from home, there was no longer a physical distinction between work life and private life. When returning to the office, this had led to a quest for flexible workspaces and into the origin of the hybrid office; working either from home or in the office. As mentioned in the introduction of this Research Plan, women experienced more domestic setbacks while working from home than men. "Covid has pushed many women back into a position of dependence and servitude" (Baazil, et al. 2021), as women are more likely to feel responsible for taking care of children that are home from school or elderly whom are suffering from bad health conditions. For women, this hybrid office structure would possibly not be ideal either.

#### Feminism and climate activism

Taking responsibility and caring for the weak or the fragile also applies to the female environmental concerns of the climate footprint of the patriarchal corporate world. There is a whole research field dedicated to feminism and environmental activism within architecture. One fitting example of a provocative project in this area is the *Wheatfield project* by the Hungarian-American artist Agnes Denes (see the next page). She planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan, New York in 1982. The choice of location provided a strong message as it was placed two blocks away from Wall Street and the World Trade Center, and facing the Statue of Liberty. It represented both world hunger and misplaced priorities, as the power of an emotional connection with the earth and the care which the crops required. The seeds were carefully placed by hand and the soil was maintained for almost four months. The field had produced an impressive amount of 500 kilograms of healthy wheat. This project reflects precise female care and a feminized responsibility towards our changing environment.

*“I decided we had enough public sculptures of men  
sitting on horses.”*

**– Agnes Denes, artist.**



Image 3: Agnes Denes, “Wheatfield - A Confrontation,” Accessed October 31, 2021 from <http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/works7.html>.

## Reflective problematization

This Research Plan focusses on changing societal values and gender paradigms within the workspace. This topic of interest is linked to the Graduation Studio of Interiors Buildings Cities in which historical, contemporary and future offices and banks have been the focus point. The first office lay-outs changed from cellular office plans to open floor plans due to new construction technologies, but the employees criticism towards the landscaped floor plan, its segregation in status and its lack of spatial control, led again to change. In current pandemic times, there is a rising call for the hybrid office. This new combination of working from home and working in the office possibly works better for men than it does for women, since the work efficiency of women decreased more than that of men while working from home in 2020. Women in general feel a big responsibility towards their care for their fellow (wo)man, the awareness of the human accountability in climate change and the environmental destruction due to the contemporary corporate world. The challenge now is to create a workspace that defies current gender paradigms and destructing societal systems. Especially women of colour and women with physical and mental disabilities experience the consequences of the current societal systems. The office should ensure an inclusive environment for women to reflect their changing role in society. This is not simply done by changing the office floor plan; a change in the corporate system is necessary. Gender inequality is a structural and cultural problem. It is rooted in societal beliefs, peoples behaviour and intellection. The question is: how can we design a workspace that challenges its current societal structures and gender paradigms? This is a complex question to answer, since it requires change in attitude of individuals and the bigger systems of the corporate world. We have seen that women often get front-positions in times of crisis. Is there another way in which we can change the current gender paradigms that does not involve a global pandemic or economic emergencies?

## Methodology

The first step into this research is to do a historical examination into the changing role of women in society and in the office environment to be able to explore the development of the office as a social system in the previous century. Topics such as the White Blouse Revolution, the origins of the secretarial pool, and domestication of the office will be examined. Case study research will complement this inquiry, as well as historical films and images of working women. Through these means, a clear picture of the changing workspace develops.

To be able to compare historical situations with current times, the contemporary research will contain visits to financial institutions and interviews with its female employees, on top of precedent studies of contemporary office buildings. Important readings that will complement this research are *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* by Caroline Criado Perez (2020) and *Relational Architectural Ecologies* edited by Peg Rawes (2013). The first book, written by Caroline Perez, reveals how we are simply ignoring half the population by creating a world built for men and the consequences of this system on us all. The second book, edited by Peg Rawes, examines the social relations of modern cultures and highlights the need to relate architecture to ecology by extending our architectural thinking. Both these books describe an important feminist discourse on either the current economy or the environment.

# Research Diagram

Mirthe Andriessen | 4707044  
Interiors Buildings Cities  
MSc 3/4 Graduation Studio  
2021-2022

**Graduation studio IBC:** historical, contemporary and future offices and banks

**Personal interest:** the influence on changing societal values and issues on the workspace

## Problematization:

1. Current social structures, power relations, gender paradigms in the workspace and in society
2. An environmental destructing system of the corporate world

**Research question:** How can we design a workspace that challenges its current societal structures and gender paradigms?

## Methodology

### Historical:

**Literature:** Francis Duffy/Daphne Spain/Kim Dovey/among others

**Other means:** case study research, historical films and images

**Development of the office:** Cellular/open/landscaped floor plan

### Contemporary:

**Covid-pandemic, economic crisis:** put women in important positions, but at the same time reduced their work efficiency

**Research methods:** visits to financial institutions, interviews, precedent studies, readings

Hybrid office

**The future office:** a workspace that defies current gender paradigms and destructing societal systems



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Little Women (2019), based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott (1869)

The Guilty Feminist Podcast:

- Making Money Matter with Sindhu Vee and guests Emma Howard Boyd and Henna Shah, 15 September 2020: <https://guiltyfeminist.com/episode/?episode=274>

- Money with Yomi Adegoke and special guest Otegha Uwagba, 1 July 2021: <https://guiltyfeminist.com/episode/?episode=318>

- Money with Claire Hooper and special guest Tessa Waters, 24 February 2019: <https://guiltyfeminist.com/episode/?episode=157>